

EMBASSY OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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**ASSISTANT SECRETARY BLAKE REMARKS AT U.S.
BANGLADESH ADVISORY COUNCIL CONGRESSIONAL
RECEPTION**

October 11, 2011

Washington, DC

Minister Moni, Members of Congress and distinguished guests. It gives me great pleasure to be here tonight in support of one of the most important countries in my region of responsibility, Bangladesh.

Let me first thank Congressman Joe Crowley and the Members of the Bangladesh Caucus for their consistent support and personal engagement to strengthen relations between the United States and Bangladesh.

Let me also thank the U.S. Bangladesh Advisory Council for sponsoring tonight's event, as well as the organizers of the Bangladesh Brand Forum for their tireless efforts to "rebrand" Bangladesh with a new image for 2011 and beyond. Finally, I'd also like to express a special welcome to Foreign Minister Moni who is back on the East Coast mere days after returning to Dhaka from a hectic schedule at the UN General Assembly.

As Assistant Secretary of State, I oversee U.S. relations with thirteen diverse nations of South and Central Asia, ranging from the steppes of Kazakhstan to the tropical islands of the Maldives. As a Muslim-majority democracy with a population of 160 million energetic people and a growing economy that has brought millions out of poverty in recent years, Bangladesh is clearly a nation with a bright future.

While Bangladesh is grappling with some of the great issues of our time, including food security, global health, and climate change, Bangladeshis have risen to face these challenges head-on, cementing their reputation as one of the most resilient and adaptable people on the planet, and a strong partner for the United States.

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Tonight's focus on re-branding is important because many people have an outdated image of Bangladesh. Yet today Bangladesh is a secular democracy with a vibrant civil society, strong pride in its national culture, and a history of religious and ethnic tolerance.

- Bangladesh has posted an economic growth rate of five to six percent each year for the past two decades, even during the worst years of the global recession.
- Bangladesh has transformed from a country plagued by famine to one that is largely self-sufficient in food production, despite rapid population growth.
- Successive governments in Bangladesh have made women's empowerment a national priority, resulting in steep drops in maternal and infant mortality, and more girls attending and graduating from school.
- The United Nations recognized Bangladesh's steady progress towards reaching the Millennium Development Goals with an award in September 2010.
- Globally, Bangladesh is the largest troop contributor to UN peacekeeping forces, with 10,000 blue-helmets on the ground serving in some of the world's most dangerous places.

Many of these successes could not have been achieved without the presence of Bangladesh's vibrant civil society. Some Bangladeshi NGOs have gone global, including BRAC, the world's largest NGO, and the Nobel Peace Prize-winning Grameen Bank.

These two organizations have revolutionized the idea of microfinance, helping millions of people, especially poor women, to start up businesses and contribute to their family's income.

Bangladesh's global brand is closely linked to the openness of its democratic space. In addition to its vibrant civil society, Bangladesh can also be proud of its free and open media, with over 300 newspapers and hundreds, if not thousands, of television radio and web outlets. Institutions such as these are fundamental to democracy and respect for human rights. The media must continue to be strengthened and given space to develop.

All of us here understand the important place that a free press and an active civil society occupy in any democratic society. To shore up the country's democratic credentials, the

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Government of Bangladesh needs to ensure that media outlets and NGOs feel safe to speak their mind and help in each of their unique ways to move the country forward in order to reach its vast potential.

We also hope that the Government will do everything possible to ensure that the effectiveness and integrity of Grameen Bank are preserved as a new leadership is chosen, so that this Nobel Prize-winning organization can fulfill its commitments to its over eight million borrowers.

All parties share responsibility to ensure that the same high standards that existed in 2008 can be sustained in the period leading up to the next elections in 2013. I look forward to a “Bangladesh Brand Election” that is seen as a model by emerging democracies around the world.

As befits a country in the “Next 11,” Bangladesh is increasingly seen as a destination for U.S. investment and a new market for U.S. products. Trade with the United States has almost tripled since 2008, and a number of prominent U.S. companies, including Chevron and Conoco-Phillips, have an active presence in Bangladesh and are helping to support its vital energy sector.

The United States has also been proud of the role Bangladesh has played in promoting greater connectivity and cooperation between the countries of South Asia. Bangladesh was the original proponent for the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), which brings the eight countries of South Asia, including India and Pakistan, together in the same room. Recent bilateral visits by the Prime Ministers of India and Bangladesh to Dhaka and New Delhi have resulted in a series of landmark agreements on border demarcation and cross-border cooperation – with agreements on water-sharing and transit expected in the near future.

Bangladeshis also play a prominent role in Afghan reconstruction through BRAC, which has a huge presence in Afghanistan, promoting health, education, and microfinance. BRAC currently operates more than 2,000 schools in Afghanistan, and has made loans to more than 100,000 Afghan households.

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The United States and Bangladesh have had a strong bilateral relationship for the past forty years, ever since the late Senator Edward Kennedy visited Bangladeshi refugees in camps in West Bengal in 1971 during the Liberation War.

Bangladesh continues to be one of our largest recipients of development assistance in Asia as we seek to help our friend and partner reach its goal of becoming a lower middle-income country by 2021. Since 1971, the U.S. Government has provided over \$5 billion in development assistance. Bangladeshis now have better access to health care, electricity, increased agricultural productivity and better nutrition.

Bangladesh continues to face specific problems stemming from climate change, population growth, poor health indicators, and food insecurity. The U.S. Government partners with the Government of Bangladesh to address these challenges and, as a result, Bangladesh is a focus country for the President's Global Health Initiative, Feed the Future Initiative, and the Global Climate Change Initiative.

The U.S. and Bangladesh have steadily increased cooperation to combat terrorism, cooperation that is vitally important for the security of our two countries and for the region.

Bangladesh's significant diaspora community, like those from other South Asian countries, has also made substantial contributions to the country's developments. There are more than 500,000 Bangladeshi Americans now helping to cement our ties. I note with pride that with the election to Congress of Hansen Clarke from Michigan's 13th District, we have the first Member of Congress with deep Bangladeshi roots.

There are many other Bangladeshi Americans making their mark in politics, business, academics, and other fields. Bangladeshi Americans also play an important role in supporting Bangladesh's development. Members of the Bangladeshi community in the United States send home over \$1.5 billion a year.

In conclusion, let me again thank the organizers and the sponsors of the Bangladesh Brand Forum. My deputy in charge of South Asia, Dr. Alyssa Ayres, represented the U.S. State

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Department at the previous “Meet Bangladesh” event in London last year and I am pleased that this year you were able to bring the Forum both to the U.S. capital of Washington, DC, and to New York City, the unofficial capital of the Bangladeshi-American community – although that might better be described as Queens!

I thank you all for coming tonight and, for those of you visiting us from overseas, I wish you a pleasant stay in the United States.

Good afternoon. It is a pleasure for me to be here today. This is my first visit to Bangladesh as Assistant Secretary for South Central Asia. I want to see first-hand how we can work with the new government here and the people to expand the good cooperation we already enjoy. During my visit, I met with people in government, political parties and civil society. I will be meeting Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina a bit later this evening. I appreciate the warm hospitality that everyone has shown me. Although my visit has been short, I have learned a great deal about Bangladesh, and am impressed with the important changes and opportunities here.

The United States and Bangladesh have been friends and allies for decades. We have worked together to build democratic institutions. The U.S. welcomed the free, fair, and transparent elections Bangladesh held last December. This proves that Bangladeshis want democracy. The United States is proud to have supported this effort. We will continue to support Bangladesh as it extends its democratic roots. We also are here to help you develop your economy, feed and educate your citizens and respond to natural disasters. And we are here to help you protect your people from those who wish to destabilize your democracy through terrorism and extremism.

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President Obama is committed to improving the U.S. relationship with the Muslim world. In Cairo, he called for a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world, based on mutual interest and mutual respect. I think that his message resonated very well, here and around the world. In the countries of South and Central Asia, which my Bureau handles, there are more than half a billion Muslim citizens. Audiences in this region positively received President Obama's Cairo speech. Most appreciated the President's desire for engagement and dialogue. I know that many Bangladeshis paid close attention to the President's address. We are pleased that so many media organizations, including many that you represent, broadcast or printed the President's speech. We are closely following the reaction here. We look forward to working with you as the President continues building bridges to the Muslim world.

In closing, let me say I enjoyed meeting with many Bangladeshis this trip and having the opportunity to review the important opportunities we have for cooperation. I look forward to continued discussions, continued dialog and continued friendship. I see great potential for U.S. – Bangladesh relations, and will make the realization of that potential a personal priority. With that, I am happy to take your questions.

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